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Deep Throat Speaks

FOR MORE THAN three decades Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and former executive editor Benjamin C. Bradlee preserved an extraordinary secret: the identity of the source known as Deep Throat, who helped inform the stories The Post published in 1972 and 1973 exposing what became known as the Watergate scandal. They kept the secret despite extraordinary pressure on The Post from the White House, including charges that Deep Throat was an invention; through the hearings and impeachment proceedings that led to President Richard M. Nixon's resignation in August 1974; and despite endless speculation about the source's identity in the years afterward. Mr. Woodward, now a Post editor, and Mr. Bernstein, who no longer works here, said that they had made a commitment not to reveal Deep Throat's identity until after his death. Yesterday that pact was finally superseded by the publication of statements by W. Mark Felt, former deputy director of the FBI, confirming that he was Deep Throat. He revealed his role in part because of his family's belief that he deserves to be honored for his actions while he is alive.

The honor is surely deserved. Mr. Felt, now 91, was a dedicated servant of the FBI, and no softie: He was convicted of (and later pardoned for) authorizing illegal acts in pursuit of leftist radicals in the early 1970s. Yet he was also outraged that the Nixon White House brazenly interfered with the FBI's investigation of the burglary of Democratic Party headquarters in June 1972 and by what he saw as Mr. Nixon's attempt to gain control over the FBI for political purposes. Risking dismissal or prosecution, he began meeting with Mr. Woodward secretly to confirm The Post's reporting about the funding of the operation and about other illegal acts by the president's top aides. He was not the only source The Post relied on; Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein tracked down dozens of others, many of whom were named in their articles. Deep Throat was nevertheless crucial to the

paper's reporting of Watergate. Following book and movie depictions of his role, he became the most famous anonymous source in the history of American journalism, and a model for government whistle-blowers.

Mr. Felt was ambivalent about his decision to cooperate with Mr. Woodward. He declined to disclose his actions for years after he retired, denying his role even to his family. By leaking details of the FBI's probe into Watergate, he violated the bureau's standards and arguably the law. Yet in retrospect it is clear that his decision was the right one. Mr. Nixon had set out to subvert the U.S. system of justice: While publicly ordering the FBI to investigate, he secretly directed a coverup intended to prevent the agency from confirming the connections between his campaign and the Watergate burglars. The FBI criminal investigation of senior White House and campaign officials was effectively blocked. Only when the complicity of such figures as former attorney general John N. Mitchell was publicly disclosed with the help of Mr. Felt did Congress begin an investigation that eventually revealed the full scope of the Watergate crimes. Had Mr. Felt remained quiet, Mr. Nixon might have succeeded in one of the most serious abuses of power ever attempted by an American president.

In a small irony, Deep Throat's unveiling comes as the media and Washington officialdom engage in one of their periodic debates about the use of anonymous sources. We think that both the debate and the newly professed cautions about relying on such sources are healthy. As we noted, The Post's reporting depended on many sources, and the truth emerged thanks to the courage of U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, then-Sen. Sam Ervin and others who rose to the occasion. But it's worth remembering that this landmark victory for the rule of law also depended on the secret patriotism of a source named Deep Throat — that is, Mark Felt. It's nice to be able to honor him by his real name while he still lives.